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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000047

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/10/2017

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SUBJECT: SYRIAN WOMEN'S ACTIVIST'S TREATMENT BY SARG  
ILLUSTRATES CHALLENGES FACING CIVIL SOCIETY ACTIVISTS

REF: DAMASCUS 01108

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Poloff met January 9 with Syrian women's activist and lawyer Daad Mousa, who is a long-time Embassy contact. For the past six months, the once-outspoken Mousa has kept a low public profile because of SARG harassment of her and a family member during 2006, as part of a broader SARG crackdown on civil society. Mousa's experiences are a good example of some of the SARG tactics of repression and illustrate how the SARG varies those methods, depending on its assessment of the intimidation necessary to silence or marginalize a particular activist. Her case is another illustration that at present, the SARG is going to great lengths to get the message out to civil society here and to any potential regime critics that nothing but silence and inactivity will be tolerated. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Syrian women's activist Da'ad Mousa told Poloff January 9 that she had ceased her activism and essentially gone underground in recent months as a result of continuing SARG pressure, threats, and violent intimidation of a family member that eventually wore down her resolve to ignore it. Mousa is a long-time Embassy contact who until eight months ago used to seek out meetings with the Ambassador (and later Charge) and PD to pitch civil society programming ideas for Embassy funding for projects such as women's shelters and training for a small women's group of documentary filmmakers. Until her decision to cease her activities, Mousa was considered by the Embassy as one of the most effective organizers in Syrian civil society, combining charisma, savvy, and an understanding of capacity building superior to that of most of her counterparts.

¶3. (C) Mousa expressed a degree of uncertainty about which of her actions had provoked the SARG to go after her, leaving open the possibility that it could have been an accumulation of SARG frustration at her successful activism rather than a specific act that provoked the SARG campaign against her. Mousa noted that she had signed the Damascus-Beirut Declaration in April 2006. In addition, she had continued in early 2006 with her women's capacity-building work in Syria and advocacy on behalf of Syrian women's rights locally and at international forums. Despite the intensifying harassment, she attended a conference in Rabat in the fall of 2006 where she was critical of the SARG for its failure to protect women's rights.

¶4. (C) Mousa described the series of measures over the past year that the SARG took to intimidate her into stopping her activism and that in the end had the desired effect. Syrian

security agents arrested her brother, Ma'an, in late February 2006, to persuade her to curtail her human rights and civil society activities (reftel). She said Ma'an was detained on trumped up charges that he had abused his civil service job at Damascus University to sell forms used by students seeking to defer their military service. Authorities confined Ma'an to a solitary cell that was so small he could not stand upright, withheld adequate food, beat him and pulled out his teeth, she said. Months later the charges against her brother were eventually dropped, she noted.

15. (C) At around the same time, SARG political security called Mousa in for questioning that focused on her capacity-building seminars for Syrian women. These activities were carried out in Syria with funding from an Amman-based German NGO, which had long carried about civil society work in Syria, Mousa said. Partly as a result of her experience but also in connection to the SARG closure in March of the EU-funded Civil Society Training Center, the NGO has stopped funding activities in Syria, Mousa said. Finally late this fall (after her attendance at the Rabat conference), the SARG issued a travel ban preventing Mousa from leaving the country, Mousa said.

16. (C) As a result of pressure that accumulated in the wake of all these measures, Mousa said she has stopped almost all of her work activities, which once included outreach and training to scores of women on their rights and freedoms under Syrian and international law. The discussion of her brother brought Mousa to the point of tears, and she noted that the travel ban prevents her from meeting with other activists outside the country, once a source of moral and intellectual support. Without strong prospects for work or travel in the near future and fearful about retaliation

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against her family, the once-outspoken Mousa expressed extreme discouragement and said she has little hope for an improved situation in Syria's internal situation anytime soon.

17. (C) COMMENT: Mousa's experiences are a good example of some of the SARG tactics of repression and illustrate how the SARG varies those methods, depending on its assessment of the intimidation necessary to silence or marginalize a particular activist. Perhaps because Mousa is a woman, and one with strong international connections, the SARG did not opt to imprison her or put her on trial for her signature on the Damascus-Beirut Declaration (as it has with other signers) and her other activism. Generally speaking, Mousa's charisma, determination, and competence as a civil society organizer in Syria and as an advocate at international conferences for Syrian women's rights likely irritated the regime, as did her effective countering at international forums (such as in Rabat), where pro-regime voices have traditionally been able to peddle their wares uncontested. Nonetheless, the SARG seems to have effectively silenced and intimidated her, for now, reading correctly that the travel ban in particular would be a crippling blow for an activist who had cultivated a rich network of counterparts in the Arab world, Europe, and even the U.S. Her case is another illustration that at present, the SARG is going to great lengths to get the message out to civil society here and to any potential regime critics that nothing but silence and inactivity will be tolerated. That backdrop is certainly one of the factors that will need to be assessed carefully in our efforts to support Syrian civil society and ramp up these groups' activities.

CORBIN